Women's Legal Service Victoria

Emerging Lawyers Program

Pilot Evaluation

2024-2025

Women's Legal Service Victoria

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Women's Legal Service Victoria

Acknowledgement of Country

Women's Legal Service Victoria works on the sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We acknowledge their role as custodians of Country and pay our respects to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. As a specialist women's legal service, we acknowledge the way Australia's colonial legal and justice system continues to disproportionately harm Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children. We commit to working in allyship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait organisations and communities to dismantle systems of marginalisation and discrimination. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. This land always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.

About Women's Legal Service Victoria

Women's Legal Service Victoria (Women's Legal) is a specialist, trauma-informed, state-wide for-purpose organisation that has been providing free specialist legal services to women since 1982. We work with, and for, women and non-binary people to address legal issues arising from family violence and relationship breakdown.

Women's Legal's vision is that women and non-binary people live free from violence and discrimination in a gender-equitable society. Our unique contribution to this vision – as lawyers, social workers, financial counsellors, advocates and educators – is to work alongside women and non-binary people experiencing disadvantage to promote their rights to live free from violence and make informed choices about their relationships.

Women's Legal specialises in family and sexual violence, family law, migration, child protection, criminal law and victims of crime assistance – recognising the intersection between the jurisdictions. We focus on women's safety, recovery from violence and economic security. We do this by:

- Providing legal advice and representation to women and non-binary people with a wraparound model of service delivery where they are supported by social workers and financial counsellors, depending on their needs.
- Building the capacity of other professionals and communities to identify and respond appropriately to legal need.
- Advocating for law and policy that respects and promotes the rights of women and non-binary people.

Women's Legal Service Victoria

Executive summary

When someone experiences family violence, access to specialist legal support can make the difference between remaining trapped and taking steps towards safety.

But across Victoria, too many people struggle to access the legal help they need because there are not enough specialist family violence lawyers in their community.

The need is significant. In 2023-24, more than 1,000 women were turned away from Women's Legal Services nationally due to a lack of capacity to assist.

Family law also has the highest level of unmet civil legal need (70.1%) among the areas surveyed in the Victoria Law Foundation's Public Understanding of Law Survey, highlighting strong demand for low- and no-cost legal assistance. These challenges are particularly acute in regional areas. While 29% of Australians live outside major capital cities, only 10.5% of lawyers practise in these communities.

At the same time, the community legal sector faces workforce shortages. A Victoria Law Foundation report in 2022 found that almost half of Victoria's community legal centres (CLCs) had staff vacancies, a total 63 vacant roles of which 65% were for full-time positions. Many community legal centres also face barriers to recruiting graduate lawyers because they need to invest significant time and resources in training and supervision, despite strong interest from graduates wanting to work in the sector.

The Emerging Lawyers Program was designed to address these interconnected challenges. By training, mentoring and supporting early-career lawyers to build specialist skills in family violence and family law and establish their careers within community legal centres, we can increase access to justice for family violence victim-survivors.

The pilot demonstrated that investing in Emerging Lawyers is an effective way to strengthen the family violence legal workforce and expand access to justice.

Fourteen Emerging Lawyers placed in community legal centres across Victoria delivered legal support to more than 3,000 Victorians.

Importantly, **nearly 80% of graduates remain working in community legal centres**, helping build a sustainable workforce in the communities that need it most.

The success of the pilot reflects Women's Legal's unique combination of specialist family violence expertise and proven capability in training, mentoring and supporting early-career lawyers.

Continued investment will enable us to scale this proven model, building a stronger legal workforce and helping more victim-survivors access specialist legal support, regardless of where they live.

> *"The Emerging Lawyers Program is a passport to being a lawyer in the CLC space. The soft skills, practical skills, the legal skills, all combined into an effective supportive program to help [Emerging Lawyers] come out the other side."*

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Program funding

Investment of $3.2 million was required to deliver the pilot. This included funding for 14 Emerging Lawyer roles for an 18-month period (including relocation and retention payments), supervision by the partner community legal centre, a Women's Legal project manager, expenses arising from training intensives, and monitoring and evaluation activities. All training and capacity building activities were provided in-kind by Women's Legal.

The pilot was funded through a combination of Commonwealth Government National Legal Assistance Partnership Vulnerable Women – front line service delivery funding and Victorian Government Bushfire Recovery Victoria and Flood Support Funding received by Women's Legal and allocated by Women's Legal to the pilot. Bushfire Recovery and Flood Support funding was allocated to place based COMMUNITY LEGAL CENTREs in bushfire and flood affected areas.

Collaboration with community legal centres

Women's Legal promoted the program and sought community legal centre partners through an Expression of Interest process in January 2024. Fourteen partner community legal centres were selected with seven partner community legal centres from regional and rural areas.

Partner community legal centres

- Allied Justice (formerly Ballarat & Grampians Community Legal Service)
- community+ Legal (formerly Brimbank Melton Community Legal Centre)
- Djirra (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Family Violence Prevention Legal Service Victoria)
- Eastern Community Legal Centre
- Gippsland Community Legal Service (Anglicare)
- Goulburn Valley Community Legal Centre (ARC Justice)
- Hume Riverina Community Legal Service (Upper Murray Family Care)
- inTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence
- Loddon Campaspe Community Legal Centre (ARC Justice)
- Mallee Family Care Community Legal Centre
- Northern Community Legal Centre
- South-East Monash Legal Service
- Emma House Legal Program (The Sexual Assault and Family Violence Centre)
- Youthlaw

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Recruiting the Emerging Lawyers

Women's Legal funded the 14 Emerging Lawyer roles and led a centralised and coordinated recruitment process in collaboration with partner CLCs.

As part of recruitment, the program was promoted widely via media outlets including social media. Over 90 applications were received from candidates; mainly Victorian based, however there were several interstate applicants.

Capability Framework
The Emerging Lawyers Capability Framework outlines the knowledge and skills required of entry level lawyers in a community legal setting with a focus on family violence and family law.

Recruited Emerging Lawyers were then employed by each participating community legal centre for an 18-month period. Emerging Lawyers commenced in late May 2024 and concluded in November 2025.

Relocation assistance was provided to individuals who relocated from interstate or moved from Melbourne to a regional area.

Learning and development plan

A learning and development plan was developed and informed the design of training and capacity building activities for the 18-month program.

The plan included:

- training intensives
- shadowing and reverse shadowing
- a community of practice

Four training intensives brought the Emerging Lawyers together – in May 2024, November 2024, June 2025, and October 2025 – to connect, learn and develop as a peer group on different capabilities as outlined in the Capability Framework.

The training intensives included workshops and panel discussions on substantive law, client engagement skills, trauma informed practices, resilience, and wellbeing. At the November 2025 training intensive, Emerging Lawyers participated in a 'Meet and Greet' session with the then Victorian Attorney General, Hon Jaclyn Symes MP, at Parliament House, where they presented the program, its achievements, and challenges.

At the partner community legal centres, Emerging Lawyers:

- delivered legal services to clients
- received supervision and feedback
- participated in other services to the community including education, stakeholder engagement and law reform.

Program governance

As Emerging Lawyers were employed by participating community legal centres, service agreements were entered into by women's legal and the community legal centre to administer funding.

An Advisory Committee was established to provide strategic guidance throughout the program on the development, implementation, impact and sustainability of the program. The Committee included representatives from the Federation of Community Legal Centres, Law Institute of Victoria, Leo Cussen Centre for Law, Victoria Law Foundation, Victoria Legal Aid, and the Victorian Legal Services Board + Commissioner.

Monitoring and evaluation

Women's Legal designed and implemented an evaluation framework to ensure key outcomes were measured, and strengths and improvement opportunities were captured. This report summarises the findings from the program evaluation.

Evaluation

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation was to understand if the program:

- achieved the objectives of:
    - increasing the capacity of community legal centres to deliver family violence and family law services
    - facilitate access to justice and safety by providing assistance to victim-survivors of family violence
    - building the capability of Emerging Lawyers to deliver family violence and family law legal services
- created a pathway for graduate lawyers in the legal assistance sector.

The evaluation also identifies improvement opportunities for future iterations of the program.

Methodology

A range of data collection activities were undertaken throughout the program. These involved surveys and/or interviews with:

- Emerging Lawyers
- Managing Lawyers and other supervising lawyers or management staff from partner community legal centres

- Women's Legal staff involved in program management and training and capacity building activity delivery
- Clients who received a service from an Emerging Lawyer

The data collection activities comprised of surveys at various time points, interviews, reflection sessions and focus group session at the end of the Program.

Administrative data was also collected. Partner community legal centres provided client demographic and service data which is aggregated and presented in this report

Insights: program implementation

> *"I feel like I belong to this program" – Emerging Lawyer*

Emerging Lawyers reported consistently high levels of satisfaction at the 6-, 12- and 18-month points of the Program; with all Emerging Lawyers sharing that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the Program.

Similarly, partner community legal centres reported consistent high levels of satisfaction with the Program. At the end of the program, partner community legal centres reflected a high level of satisfaction with the support provided by Women's Legal during the Program.

Insights from interviews with Women's Legal staff revealed strengths in the team delivering the program. Staff shared that:

- teams across the organisation demonstrated strong collaboration, leadership and targeted expertise.
- the cross-directorate expertise resulted in diversity in the approach to training and capacity building activities, which led to better program outcomes.
- the program manager demonstrated strong leadership in bringing in the right experts, enabling teams to focus on their strengths and contribute to program outcomes.

Collaboration with participating community legal centres

The program positively strengthened relationships between Women's Legal and partner community legal centres. Approaches that contributed to this included:

- Women's Legal openness and responsiveness to feedback from community legal centres.
- Regular communications throughout the program.

This has seeded broader collaboration on service delivery, workforce development, and advocacy.

A named tension of the Program was Women's Legal's dual role as a funder of the partner community legal centres and a partner in collaboration to deliver the program. Governance was established to manage this including service agreements. No feedback was provided by participating community legal centres in the evaluation that this dual role negatively impacted collaboration.

Centralised recruitment

The Program comprised a centralised recruitment process, which was managed by Women's Legal. This meant all Emerging Lawyers were recruited, and onboarded on the same timeframe, before the first training intensive commenced.

Women's Legal and partner community legal centres shared that:

- the centralised recruitment process required considerable resourcing from Women's Legal to undertake.
- having all Emerging Lawyers commence at the same time introduced tight timeframes for community legal centres to select their preferred candidate.
- the process encouraged a wider pool of quality candidates than if participating community legal centres had advertised the positions themselves. this was particularly the case for regional community legal centres.
- for regional community legal centres the pool of applicants was also used to fill other funded vacant roles providing a secondary benefit to the partner community legal centres.
- candidates viewed the centralised training and development plan delivered by Women's Legal and being involved in a Program with a cohort of other graduate lawyers as positive aspects of the Program and attractive reasons for applying.

People's eyes might be open to working in Mildura or regional area that they may not have otherwise considered"

Community legal centre resourcing requirements

The majority (73%) of partner community legal centres reported that the workload during the Program was about the same as they had expected or less; and indicated that they could comfortably accommodate the Program amongst their other commitments.

Enabling factors for community legal centre involvement included:

- having appropriate organisational structures.
- planning for Emerging Lawyers to attend intensive workshops (e.g. when rostering and allocating case work).
- ensuring senior lawyers are engaged to provide supervision and mentoring support to the Emerging Lawyer.
- having pre-existing induction processes for new lawyers.
- having existing processes for new lawyers to shadow and reverse shadow more experienced colleagues.

Amongst Managing Lawyer respondents, there were high ratings of the ability of their centre to support the Emerging Lawyer. During the Program, Women's Legal received some feedback on the level of supervision being provided with some Emerging Lawyers seeking additional support and touch points with their supervising lawyer given the nature of the role, their level of experience and (in some circumstances) the relocation requirements.

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Reporting requirements

Partner community legal centres were required to provide administrative service reports on either a quarterly or 6 monthly basis (to align with Women's Legal reporting requirements under the relevant funding allocated) and case studies 6 monthly. Approximately half (56%) of partner community legal centres indicated it was easy to compile the administrative service data for regular progress reports to Women's Legal.

In interviews, some partner community legal centres expressed concerns that reporting of client numbers does not always reflect the extent of the work that has been undertaken. For example, some community legal centres work with fewer clients but in a more intensive and integrated way, which may make the Emerging Lawyer's contribution appear less substantial.

The limitations of high level quantitative administrative data in demonstrating the complexity of legal issues and intensity of services provided is not unique to the Emerging Lawyers Program. Case studies and client demographic data provided by partner community legal centres indicated that many clients experienced barriers to accessing justice which can impact complexity and require more intensive legal assistance. By bringing together a range of data insights – both qualitative and quantitative – the monitoring and evaluation plan mitigated the risk of relying on administrative service data alone.

Emerging Lawyers experience

Broadly, Emerging Lawyers indicated high levels of satisfaction across the four intensive trainings delivered during the program. Emerging Lawyers reflected positively on:

- the structured content at the start of the program which helped to establish foundational legal knowledge.
- the program's focus on practice skills and the training providing practical "real-life" experience (e.g. through the moot court and client appointment simulations using actors).
- the focus on self-care, wellbeing and vicarious trauma.

Feedback on the latter, though, was mixed. This is explored further in the 'Lessons Learnt' section, below.

Broadly, Emerging Lawyers indicated high levels of agreement that there was a safe learning environment during the intensive trainings. Further, Emerging Lawyers stated they were able to contact Women's Legal training facilitators if they needed further support in between the intensive trainings.

Emerging Lawyers reflected that overall their workload was manageable across the program. It was a common experience for Emerging Lawyers to have a reduced workload initially and this increased as confidence and skills developed. Key enablers of workload management identified by Emerging Lawyers included a culture of work-life balance at the community legal centre, regular supervision to monitor workload, and forward planning to facilitate attendance at the intensive trainings and communities of practice.

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Peer network

A significant strength of the program was having a group of Emerging Lawyers participating as a cohort. This created a supportive group environment for lawyers at a similar stage of their career with a shared commitment to improving access to justice for victim-survivors of family violence.

Emerging Lawyers shared benefits of this network including:

- Peer support – the ability to "phone a friend" where support was needed outside of their community legal centre from a peer who may be going through a similar experience.
- Peer mentoring – to ask, for example, for resources to assist in their work.
- Community and connection – particularly for those based in regional community legal centres where it can be more isolating.

Continuous improvement opportunities

Insights to inform future iterations of the program focused on:

- Planning: the pilot has provided data and insights on the resourcing and time required to deliver the Program. Lessons learnt on resourcing are not unexpected from a pilot and can inform resource planning for future iterations of the Program.
- Communications: the importance of clear communications on Program requirements to participating community legal centres including data reporting for accountability purposes and sharing pilot insights on supervision and support requirements for graduate lawyers.

Access to justice

The program achieved its objectives of increasing the capacity of community legal centres to deliver family violence and family law services and facilitating access to justice and safety by providing assistance to victim-survivors of family violence.

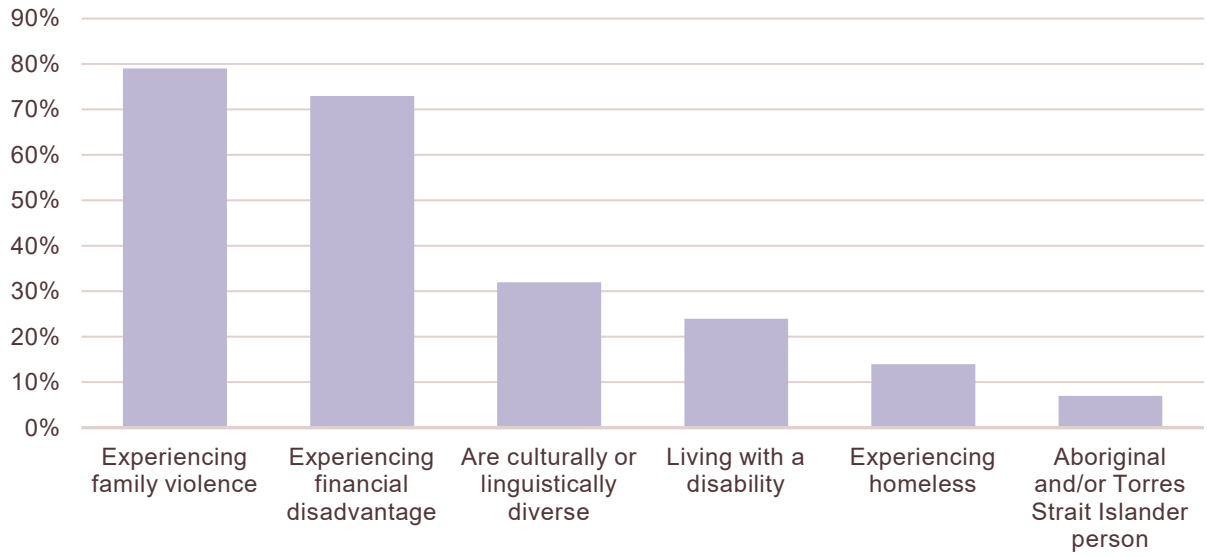
Services delivered and clients assisted

Through the program, Emerging Lawyers delivered 4,469 services to 3,066 clients. Most clients (79%) were experiencing or had experienced family violence. Clients also experienced a number of barriers in access to justice, as shown graph 1.

78 per cent of clients identified as female. Almost half of clients (47%) were from a single parent family with dependent children.

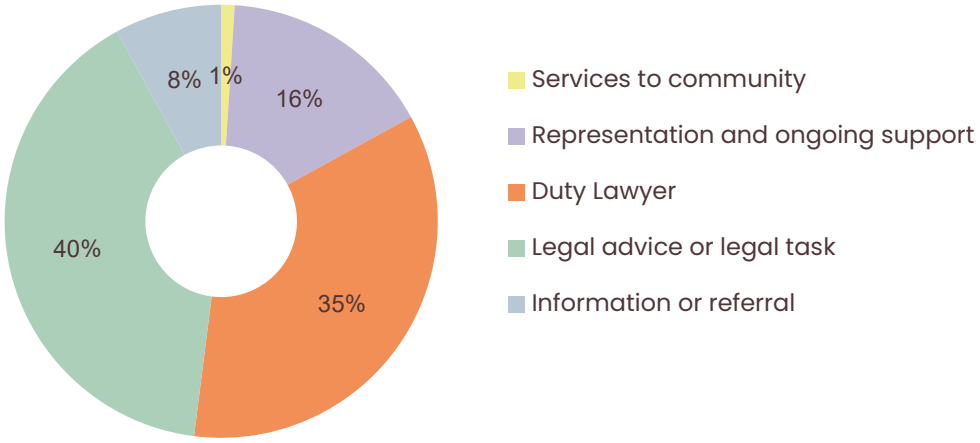
70 per cent of services responded to civil law legal problems, which encompasses family violence intervention order related legal assistance. 38 percent of services assisted with family law legal issues.

Graph 1: Percentage of clients experiencing barriers in access to justice



Most clients received legal advice or duty lawyer services (see Graph 2). This is unsurprising, as junior lawyers begin with the delivery of discrete legal services as they build their practice skills.

Graph 2: Total services by service type



Client feedback

A client feedback survey was administered as part of the program's monitoring and evaluation activities, with 147 clients surveyed.

Clients overwhelmingly indicated that:

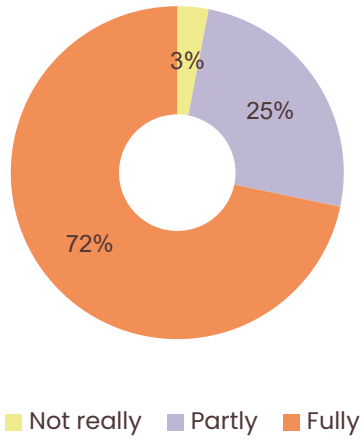
- they felt fully (80%) listened to and understood by the Emerging Lawyer.
- the Emerging Lawyer fully (71%) or partly (25%) helped them understand their legal issue and the options available.

Most clients reported that they fully (71%) or partly (25%) understood the legal advice provided.

For those who responded 'not really' to this question, additional feedback focused on wanting more explanation of the situation and implications.

Clients shared that legal information can be overwhelming and unfamiliar and more detailed explanations would be helpful to their understanding, particularly around the implications of different legal options.

Graph 3: Client survey feedback



Nine out of 10 surveyed clients indicated that the advice from their lawyer fully or partly helped them make informed decisions about their legal issues.

For clients who did not feel that the advice helped them make an informed decision, additional feedback focused on limited access to the lawyer when they had follow up questions or that they were unclear about the advice provided, they were unsure all options were explored, or they wanted to feel assured that the advice they received was tailored to their circumstances.

Workforce development

"I think [Women's Legal facilitators] were essentially primarily responsible for providing us with the skills and knowledge of what we need, and were exceptional in their work." – Emerging Lawyer

The Program achieved its objectives of creating a new pathway for graduate lawyers and built the capability of Emerging Lawyers to effectively deliver family violence and family law legal services.

A new pathway for graduate lawyers

The program employed 14 Emerging Lawyers from over 90 applications.

Most Emerging Lawyers had completed their law degrees in Australia, with four entering the profession through the Juris Doctor pathway. Emerging Lawyers graduated from various law schools and completed their Practical Legal Training (PLT) through a range of providers.

While this was their first legal role, the cohort included both first-time professionals and individual with prior degrees or careers (in social work, nursing, policing and social policy).

Six of the Emerging Lawyers identified as being from culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) backgrounds and spoke languages other than English at home.

Capacity building

A "holistic lawyering" approach was taken in designing and developing the training and capacity building activities. This was guided by the Competency Framework, which had a focus on:

- substantive law
- practice skills
- vicarious trauma
- resilience and wellbeing.

Priority competencies

Across seven competencies prioritised for monitoring and evaluation, overall Emerging Lawyers reported a positive change in their knowledge and skill from the baseline survey completed at commencement to the final survey administered at the end of the program. This is summarised in the table below.

The lower positive percentage change for competencies focused on 'understanding the dynamics and impacts of family violence' and 'ability to adopt trauma informed and client-centred approaches' is not unexpected. Given the complex legal and non-legal issues of community legal centre clients, this is an area that will require continuing professional development to strengthen practice skills. We are confident, though, that the Program has provided strong foundational skills that can be further developed.

Program outcomes			
Competency	**% increase**	**% no change**	**% decrease**
Ability to advise clients on intersecting legal problems	83	8	8
Ability to provide family violence duty lawyer services	83	8	8
Ability to assist a client when jurisdictions intersect	75	17	8
Ability to understand the relevant act (*Family Law Act 1975* (Cth))	75	17	8
Ability to undertake casework	75	17	8
Understanding of the dynamics and impacts of family violence	67	17	8
Ability to adopt trauma informed and client-centred approach	50	50	0

Ability to undertake casework

A notable competency where there was improvement – particularly given the unmet legal need data in Victoria – is the increased ability to undertake casework.

The matrix below shows paired data for 12 Emerging Lawyers in further detail with a focus on casework skills. The vertical axis provides the baseline self-assessment data, and the horizontal axis provides the end of program data.

Nine of the 12 Emerging Lawyers (75%) reported an increase (from basic to intermediate or advanced). These are illustrated by the green squares.

		Self-rated knowledge at final completion (in which category did they finish?) *				
		Beginner	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert
Self-rated knowledge at first completion (in which category did they start?)	Beginner	0	1	6	1	0
	Basic	1	1	0	0	0
	Intermediate	0	0	0	0	1
	Advanced	0	0	0	1	0
	Expert	0	0	0	0	0

The improved knowledge and skills to provide casework services was further confirmed by Managing Lawyer assessments of the Emerging Lawyers' knowledge and skills at the end of the program.

This is a success for the program given that family law has the highest percentage of unmet civil legal need in Victoria and there is a high demand for end-to-end family law services.

Partner community legal centre reflection

Partner community legal centres indicated that the positive impact of an additional lawyer was felt sooner than expected, with partner community legal centres attributing this to the training and capacity building activities delivered under the learning and development plan.

Managing Lawyers reported that the Program allowed them more time to focus supervision on developing practical skills rather than substantive legal knowledge. The reason provided for this: the training delivered by Women's Legal provided both a theoretical foundation and a focus on practice skills, which community legal centres could further develop.

Sustainable impact

Eleven of the 14 Emerging Lawyers were offered contract extensions or ongoing employment at their community legal centre at the end of the program.

An unanticipated positive outcome of the Program was the broader knowledge and resource sharing in a community legal centre from participation in the program. Managing Lawyers were able to access the Women's Legal learning management system to share resources with their broader teams and Emerging Lawyers undertook informal and formal sharing of information and knowledge with their peers; for example, in casework meetings and through presentations.

Continuous improvement opportunities

Emerging Lawyers, partner community legal centres and Women's Legal staff identified opportunities to further strengthen learning and development activities.

As the program progressed, the Women's Legal project team reflected on some of the challenges in developing training content that aligned to levels of experience due to the different rates of development amongst the Emerging Lawyers cohort. Regular supervision and constructive feedback was seen as a key enabler of professional development between intensive trainings.

"...With [Women's Legal's] help, we're able to supplement that support...[and the Emerging Lawyer] is going to develop quicker with us than she would somewhere else."

Some feedback was received from the Emerging Lawyers that content on vicarious trauma across the intensive trainings and the community of practice was repetitive. The view of Women's Legal is that vicarious trauma is a core topic and one that is important to revisit regularly given the nature of work undertaken by community legal centre lawyers

Subsequent reflections from a group of Emerging Lawyers indicated the value of the Program's focus on wellbeing and vicarious trauma as it supported the lawyers to establish sustainable work practices from the beginning of their legal career as well as equipping them with confidence to seek supervision and other support when needed.

Recommendations for future delivery of the program:

- Reviewing the order in which some training is delivered to consolidate foundational knowledge and skills that are then further advanced.
- Maintaining some flexibility in the final six months of the program to respond to knowledge and skill gaps identified by Emerging Lawyers and their Managing Lawyers.
- Provide other learning opportunities such as shadowing Women's Legal lawyers delivering services as well as opportunities to learn from a broader group of Women's Legal lawyers.
- The focus on vicarious trauma and wellbeing is retained but review of the content is undertaken to ensure it is engaging and not repetitive.

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Conclusion

In comparison to traditional practical legal training undertaken by lawyers, this program provided a distinct competitive edge. The focus on developing a suite of practical skills for working in the community legal centre sector was identified as particularly valuable, including:

- increased understanding of the application of law in the community legal centre context.
- development of trauma-informed and client-centred approaches.
- specialist family violence training including intersections with family law and other practice areas.
- foundational legal practice skills such as writing file notes, drafting documents, negotiation and advocacy.
- the provision of practical case studies, the moot court (with involvement of Magistrates and Police Prosecutors) and client appointment simulations using actors in training to reinforce learning through real-world scenarios.
- a focus on skills to support lawyer wellbeing.

All Emerging Lawyers and 91% of partner community legal centres indicated they would participate in the program again. moreover, all partner community legal centre reported that it would be sustainable for their community legal centre to be involved in this program again.

Although partner community legal centres demonstrated high levels of optimism about the Program's future given the success of the pilot, the ability to repeat it in future will be dictated by the funding environment.